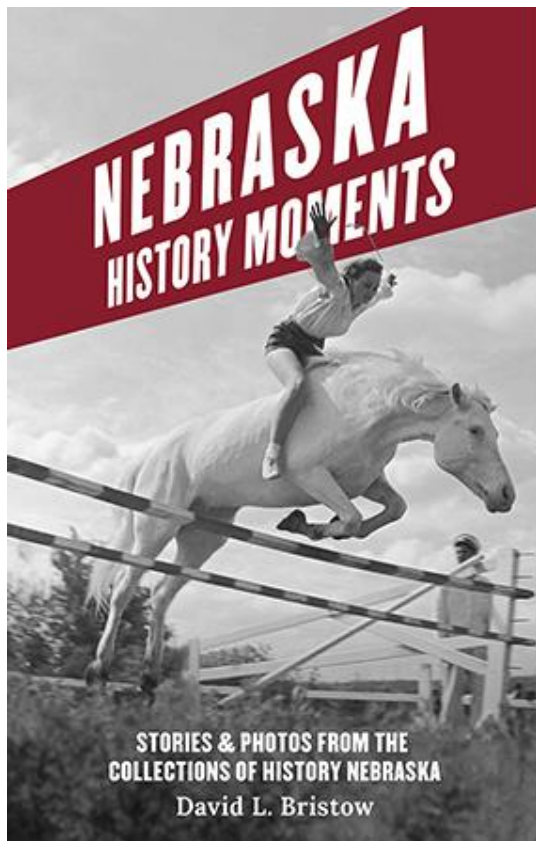




It's September 1, 2021. In today's issue: Who is the woman on the white horse?; FDR in Fremont; Husker radio in the 1930s; "Too educated to teach" and other back-to-school stories.

Who is the woman on the white horse?



Leslie Fisher recognized her mother right away. She was looking at the front cover of [Nebraska History Moments](#), where a perfectly timed photo captures a young bareback rider and her horse in mid-jump.

The 1953 photo is from the White Horse Ranch Collection at History Nebraska, but is not otherwise labeled. The book uses the photo to tell the story of the ranch and its albino horses and traveling shows. Fisher contacted History Nebraska to tell the story of her mother's remarkable and tragic life.

Mildred Louise "Peggy" Johnson was born in 1935 in Elsie, Nebraska (Perkins County), one of six children of "poor Swedish immigrants." [Keep reading, and see more photos.](#)

Drought, trains, and a chicken dinner: FDR's 1936 campaign stop in Fremont



It was billed as a presidential tour of the drought-stricken areas of the Midwest, but President Franklin Roosevelt was in full campaign mode when his train stopped in Fremont on September 2, 1936.

Digitized by History Nebraska, this newsreel has no sound, but the three-minute clip has plenty to see. It gives a lot of attention to the other newsreel cameras and radio microphones—the national media presence seems as much a part of the story as the presidential visit. [Keep reading.](#)

Husker football allowed only one radio broadcast per season in the 1930s



In September 1936 Nebraska was in the midst of a severe drought and President Franklin Roosevelt was touring the state talking with farmers (see above). But Nebraskans had another pressing concern that shared the front page with the presidential visit:

Why did the University of Nebraska broadcast only one Cornhusker football game a year?

“Taxpayers feel they support these schools and have a right to hear the reports of the games,” said the *Lincoln State Journal* on September 4, 1936.

But the University of Nebraska wasn’t alone in being leery of radio. The *Journal* polled 74 universities and found that 38 permitted football broadcasts and 36 banned or limited them. Why? [Keep reading.](#)

More Back-to-School stories

Continuing our series from last month

Too educated to teach: Letters from a Nebraska educator in the 1890s



Sadie B. Smith was a Nebraska teacher in the late nineteenth century. She had to find the balance between being educated enough to teach, but not too educated to be employable. What qualified as “too educated”?

A high school diploma. [Keep reading.](#)



Did you know that the Omaha Police Department instituted the first safety patrols in the United States in 1923?

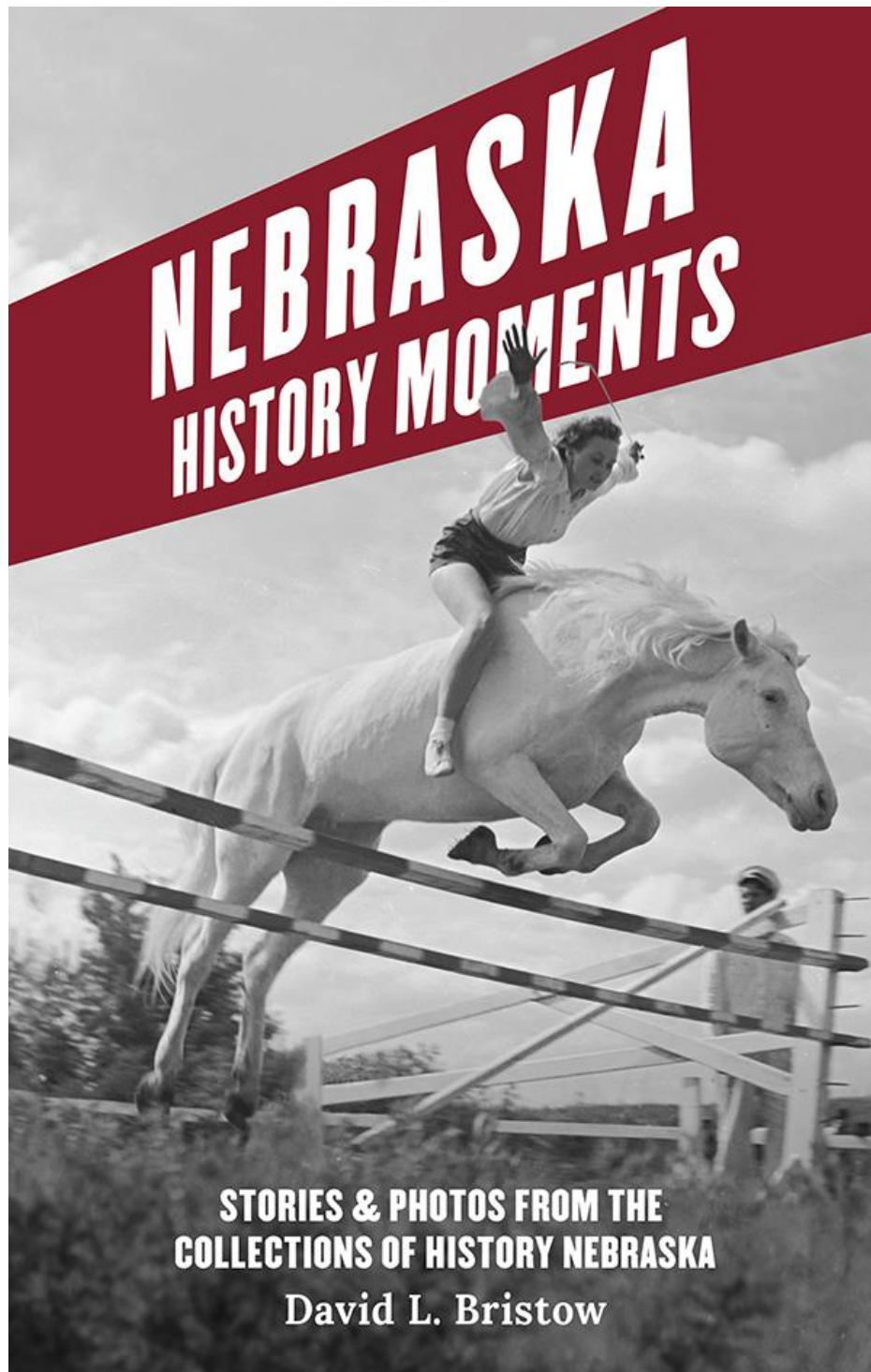
With the rise of automobiles in the 1920s, school safety patrols grew out of concerns for the well-being of students as they walked to school. [Keep reading.](#)

Brown County's Sod High School



Lakeland High School is believed to be the only high school built of sod in the US. Unlike the camera that recorded this photo, it stood straight and upright, and unlike schools today it also had a barn for students' horses. [Keep reading.](#)

The Woman on the White Horse



By David L. Bristow, Editor

Leslie Fisher recognized her mother right away. She was looking at the front cover of *Nebraska History Moments*, where a perfectly timed photo captures a young bareback rider and her horse in mid-jump.

The 1953 photo is from the White Horse Ranch Collection at History Nebraska, but is not otherwise labeled. In the book, I used the photo to tell the story of the ranch and its albino horses and traveling shows. Fisher contacted me to tell the story of her mother's remarkable and tragic life.

Mildred Louise "Peggy" Johnson was born in 1935 in Elsie, Nebraska (Perkins County), one of six children of "poor Swedish immigrants." Her mother was a remarried widow, and Peggy was a child of the second husband.



Photo: Peggy Johnson (center) with her family. Unless otherwise noted, all photos in this post are courtesy of Leslie Fisher.

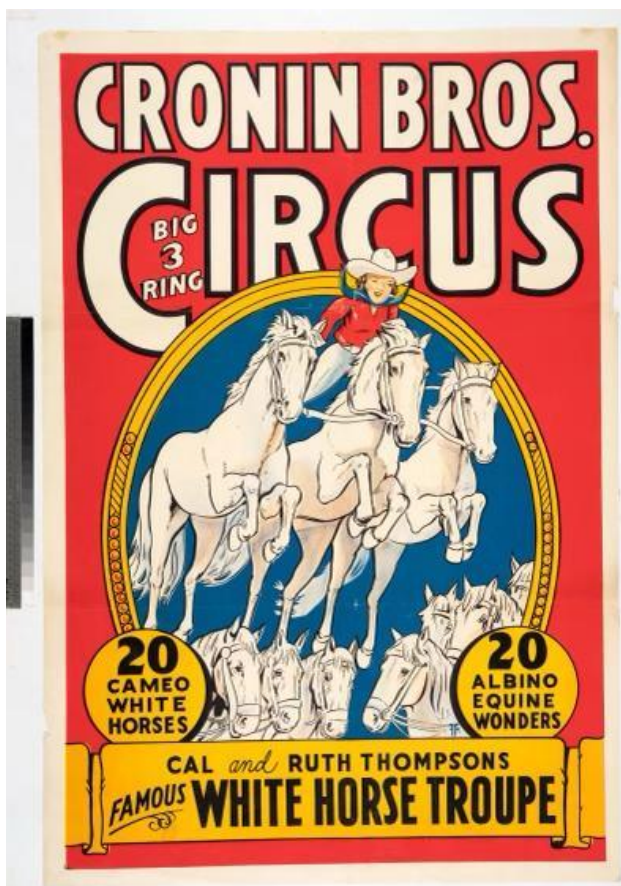
Mr. Johnson spent many hours with Peggy, teaching her how to ride and care for horses. He bought her a custom-made saddle for her sixteenth birthday. Peggy was with her father when he died later that year, kicked in the head while training a horse.





Photos: Peggy and her father.

Losing her beloved father was a terrible blow. Peggy soon dropped out of high school, ran away from home, and spent the next year living with relatives in Louisiana. After returning home, she began spending summers learning trick riding at the White Horse Ranch near Naper. From about age seventeen to nineteen she performed in a traveling circus and competed in barrel racing and other rodeo events.





Following the expectations of her time and place, Peggy gave up her dreams of becoming a rodeo star when she married and started a family, eventually becoming the mother of five. She and her husband lived on an acreage near North Platte.

“She loved horses,” said Fisher, who remembers her mom spending hours caring for them. Peggy didn’t talk much about it, but Fisher said her mother missed performing, and that she struggled with depression severe enough to affect her parenting.

Following a divorce when she was about twenty-seven, Peggy moved from the acreage and sold the horses. Fisher says her mother never owned a horse again, and to the best of her knowledge never rode one again.

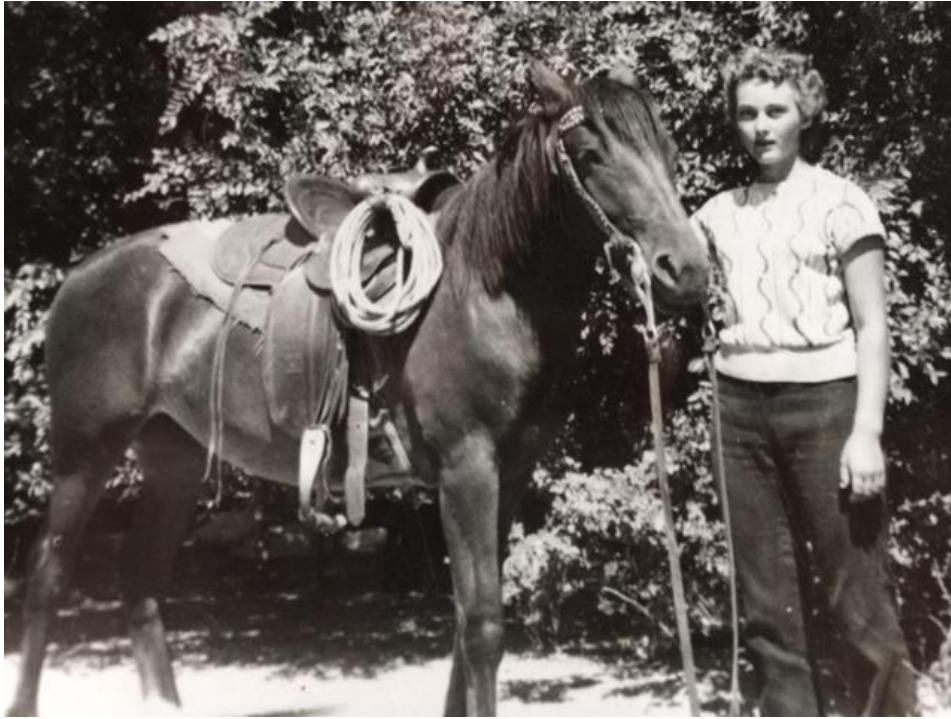


Photo: "Mom's beloved horse, Smokey."

Peggy eventually found new animals to care for. She began breeding and showing poodles after moving to Ogallala in 1969. Fisher said her mom “got happy again when she got the dogs,” which won many ribbons at dog shows over the years.

Peggy survived an abusive second marriage, and lived with diabetes for many years. Her health was declining by the time she was in her fifties. Seriously injured in a 1993 car accident, she never fully recovered, dying at home in Fort Collins. She was fifty-eight.

Fisher sounded wistful about the 1953 photograph of her mother on horseback. Peggy was about eighteen at the time, graceful, in perfect control, arms outstretched as if in flight.

“That picture is probably the happiest moment of her life,” Fisher said.

Below: The uncropped 1953 photo from History Nebraska's collection. For design purposes, the photo is reversed on the book cover. (History Nebraska RG1714-15)



(Posted 9/1/2021)

Drought, trains, and a chicken dinner: FDR's 1936 campaign stop in Fremont



By David L. Bristow, Editor

It was billed as a presidential tour of the drought-stricken areas of the Midwest, but President Franklin Roosevelt was in full campaign mode when his train stopped in Fremont on September 2, 1936.

Digitized by History Nebraska, this [newsreel](#) has no sound, but the three-minute clip has plenty to see. It gives a lot of attention to the other newsreel cameras and radio microphones—the national media presence seems as much a part of the story as the presidential visit.

At the 2:45 mark we see how the wheelchair-bound Roosevelt stood while holding the arm of a man at his side. The public never saw his wheelchair. At 2:54 we see the president chatting with Nebraska governor Robert LeRoy Cochran, who was riding the presidential train to a drought conference in Des Moines. We even get a brief glimpse of First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt at 3:13.

The ongoing drought was on everyone's mind. FDR had **just come from the Nebraska Panhandle**, where he talked with farmers in Sidney and North Platte. And not shown here but aboard the train was Waterloo, Nebraska, farmer Gus Sumnick, "who entertained Roosevelt with a chicken dinner at his farm during the 1932 campaign." Sumnick told reporters he hoped to discuss farm issues with the president.

"I ought to know something about farming," Sumnick said. "I've been a farmer 45 years, from hired man up." Farmers were going to need more federal help, he said, if they were going to put in another crop. He ended up talking with Roosevelt for about half an hour. Governor Cochran, meanwhile, talked to the president about the need for major flood control projects in the Republican River valley. The valley had flooded disastrously a year earlier.

That November, Nebraskans gave FDR more than 57 percent of the vote (41 percent voted for Republican nominee Alf Landon). It was the second—and last—time Roosevelt carried Nebraska in his four presidential campaigns.



Video still: Nebraska governor "Roy" Cochran with Roosevelt.

Husker football allowed only one radio broadcast per season in the 1930s



Photo: Cornhuskers with Head Coach Biff Jones, circa 1937. RG2758-100-57

By David L. Bristow, Editor

In September 1936 Nebraska was in the midst of a severe drought and President Franklin [Roosevelt was touring the state](#) talking with farmers. But Nebraskans had another pressing concern that shared the front page with the presidential visit.

Why did the University of Nebraska broadcast only one Cornhusker football game a year?

“Taxpayers feel they support these schools and have a right to hear the reports of the games,” said the *Lincoln State Journal* on September 4, 1936.

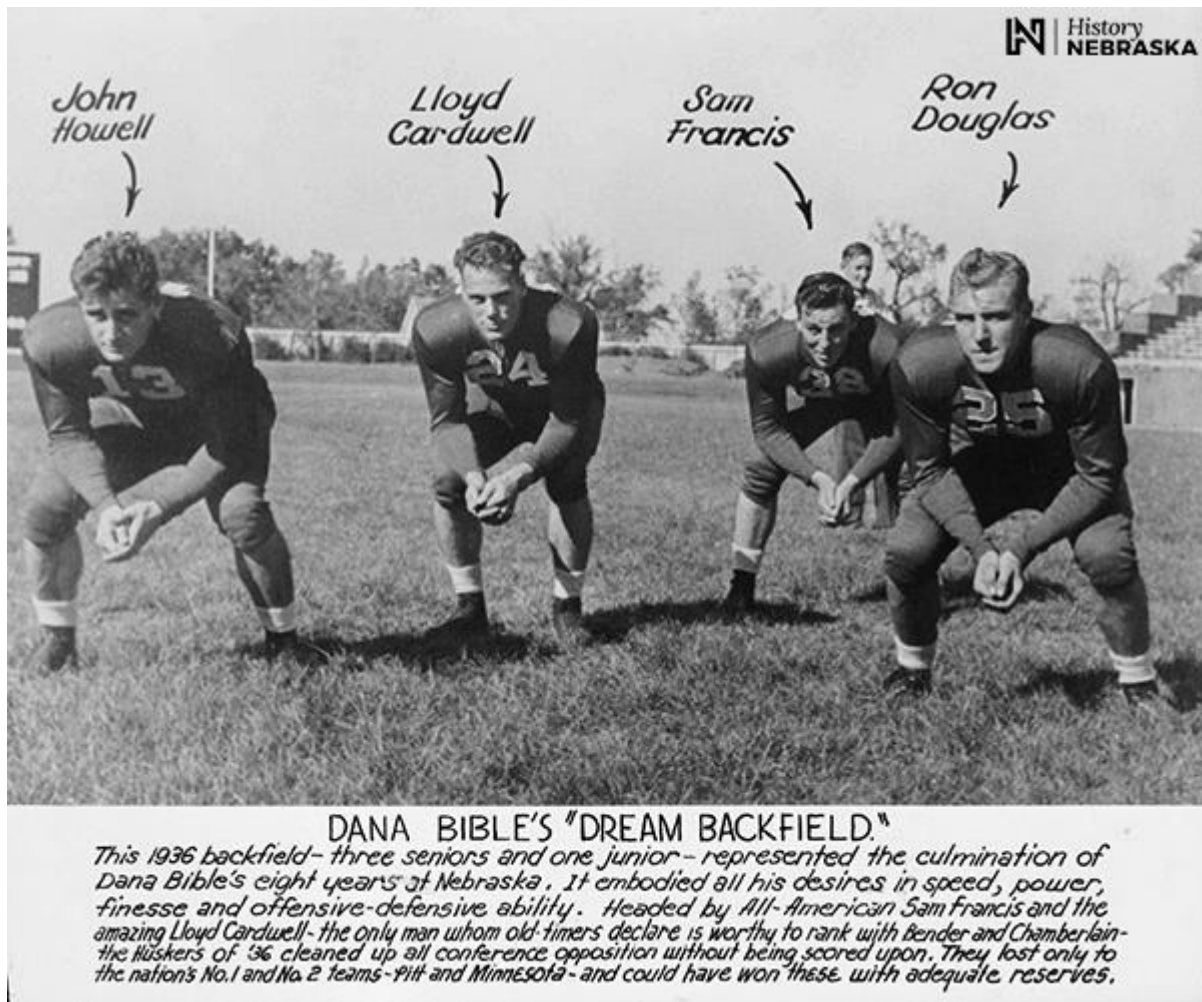


Photo: Great things were expected of Coach Dana Bible's team in 1936. The Cornhuskers entered the season as reigning Big Six champions.

But the University of Nebraska wasn't alone in being leery of radio. The *Journal* polled 74 universities and found that 38 permitted football broadcasts and 36 banned or limited them.

It was about money. Many universities carried debt for stadiums and other sports facilities, and feared that radio broadcasts would depress gate receipts—especially by fair-weather fans who checked the weather forecasts on game day before buying tickets. Nebraska had winning teams, but usually didn't quite fill the 31,000-seat Memorial Stadium in those days. The university selected for broadcast one game a year that was likely to be a sellout. In 1936 it was Pittsburgh.

Nebraska head coach Dana X. Bible wanted to keep limiting broadcasts until all of Nebraska's facilities were paid off. After that, he said, it would worthwhile to look into some kind of commercial deal. Nebraska played in the Big Six Conference (the future Big 8, and predecessor of today's Big XII). Big Six schools were on their own to make deals. Iowa State, Kansas, Kansas State, and Missouri allowed broadcasts of all their home games; Oklahoma and Nebraska did not.

Two conferences had signed contracts with oil companies that sound like low-rent predecessors of today's network deals. The Pacific Coast Conference received \$100,000 for the rights to broadcast its conference games, to be divided equally among its ten schools. The Southwest Conference split \$14,000 per season among seven teams.

Nebraskans who owned radios tuned in on November 14 to hear the Cornhuskers lose to Pittsburgh 19-6, their second and final loss of a conference championship season.



Photo: The 1936 Nebraska Cornhuskers. RG2758-103-39. Head Coach Dana X. Bible (front, center) left Nebraska after the season and spent the rest of his head coaching career with the Texas Longhorns.

Too educated to teach: Letters from a Nebraska educator in the 1890s



Sadie B. Smith, North Bend, 1898

Sadie B. Smith was a Nebraska teacher in the late nineteenth century who had to balance being educated enough to teach but not “too” educated to be employable. What qualified as “too” educated?

A high school diploma.

Sadie’s letters to her future husband, Rollin A. Trail, cover a seventeen-year courtship from 1889 to 1906. They give readers a rich look into the life of a young, ambitious teacher in small-town Nebraska during a time when taxpayer-supported, public education on the frontier was in its infancy, and the idea that a woman might see teaching as her career instead of as a filler between middle school and marriage was unheard of. These letters are in our collections, and Rollin and

Sadie's daughter Rosalie Trail Fuller writes about them in the Winter 1977 and Fall 1979 editions of *Nebraska History*.

Sadie B. Smith was born December 24, 1873, to Oren Sylvester Smith and Sarah Frances Thompson Smith in a sod house north of Western in Saline County. She attended high school in Crete, and during her senior year she substituted at a rural elementary school in the area.

Friends told Sadie that graduating from high school jeopardized her chances to teach in rural schools. A high school diploma would designate her as "stuck up," and she wouldn't be able to connect or communicate well with her students and their parents. Prejudice against high school-educated teachers was so threatening that Sadie learned dressmaking as a back-up trade in case she couldn't find employment at a school.

High school curriculum was a little different from what we expect from students today; Sadie studied Latin through Virgil, algebra, geometry, trigonometry, English literature, physics, and botany. Despite sentiments opposing highly-educated teachers, Sadie graduated high school in June 1891, when she was 17. After graduation, Sadie attended the county institute at Wilber to earn her teachers' certificate. County superintendents oversaw these institutes, which helped instruct teachers before they took over their own school.

Sadie was hired for a two-month term at the Coplin School at \$25 per month. Later, she secured a position at another school at \$30 per month for a two-month term. But even though the school found nothing wrong with her teaching, Sadie was not rehired. A local girl who had passed the teachers' examination, but had no teaching experience and no high school diploma, underbid Sadie by \$5 for the spring term. The older boys would be working in the field, so the school board thought the teaching would be easier and therefore should also be less expensive to taxpayers. Keeping order in the schoolroom was valued more than the quality of the curriculum or the instruction. The community also felt that the teacher's pay should remain in the district and benefit a local girl. After all, most teachers were expected to teach only a term or two before getting married, and the salary would benefit her hope chest.



Rollin A. Trail, University of Nebraska graduation, 1897

As a result, Sadie moved to Colorado Springs with her father and stepmother. She went to the ranching country west of Colorado Springs, where she earned \$45 a month to teach a summer term.

After two years of teaching in Colorado, Sadie returned to Nebraska, enrolled in the Peru State Normal School as a senior, and graduated in 1895 when she was 21. Sadie's desire to learn so she could be a better teacher outweighed her concerns about being "overeducated." She also attended the Normal School in Lincoln while she taught at Dunbar after her graduation from Peru State.

In September 1896, Saide went to North Bend in Dodge County to be a "high school assistant," which meant she taught Latin, algebra, history, literature, botany, physical Geography, and grammar. After Sadie listed off her course load, she remarked to Rollin in a Sept. 13, 1896 letter, "Perhaps I shall have plenty of spare time, but I can't see it now."

Sadie's letters reveal that problems that plagued teachers in 1896 are similar to those educators are facing today. North Bend didn't even pay her when she first started. "I have just labored five months without one dollar's pay," she writes on February 7, 1897. "It is always just coming. Last reported, 'we will have some money in, next week...'"

She writes in 1899 that her superintendent was making \$1,000 a year to teach three classes, two of them with six students, along with his superintending duties. Sadie made \$495 per year, and she taught seven classes, each class ranging from seventeen to fifty students. She writes, "...I grow unutterably weary looking over narratives and outlines and questions." At this time, Sadie was also considered the high school's principal. She writes that her superintendent "...had given me the title of principal and when I remonstrated with him he said, 'Why that is what you are; you do the work of a principal and are entitled to the name.' If it amounted to anything I should feel elated, but it doesn't so I am no larger than before..."



Sadie Smith and a group of her North Bend friends.

L-R: Edith Stocking, Luella Owen, Sadie Smith, Cora Owen, May Dion, Rosalie Dion, and Mrs. Dion, 1898

Her low salary is even more remarkable when you consider that Sadie literally put out fires when she was teaching: “When I walked into the high school room a lurid glare met my sight. The red flames were leaping past the second floor in the ventilation shaft, and without stopping to reason as to what I was doing, I rushed down and started those children who had arrived [to go] for help. Meanwhile a big boy and I pumped water and poured on the fire. Some men arrived, and with some six or eight buckets of water put it out.”

But Sadie loved teaching. She writes on Oct. 3, 1897: “It is quite different to go back to a school the second year, where there is a chance to profit from your first year’s blunders, than to start in a new place, where you can’t profit by any former experience. Each year I teach I like the work better.” She also loved her fellow teachers, “Some of the other teachers take dinner here and we have jolly times I tell you. We make enough noise to be heard several blocks at times. It seems to be the end and aim of each one in the crowd to get a joke on me, and I spend my time getting even and generally succeed.”



North Bend High School

After she had been at North Bend for nearly four years, Sadie began considering her next career move. She tells Rollin, “The folks are very anxious for me to rest a year and spent time with them. I’d like this very much, but how utterly useless for me to think of wasting a year at my

time of life. It is a very short time when we use every moment. I can't see how people get anywhere at all who waste their time."

Sadie's desire to teach did not let her take a year off. She accepted a position as principal of Holdrege High School (a real principal position, not just a title since she was doing all the work anyway) in the spring of 1900, and she remained there until 1905. She earned \$65 a month at Holdrege. On March 7, 1906, when she was 32, she and Rollin married. They traveled with his job for the railroad and had three children – one of whom was born in an apple-picker's shack in Washington state. The family eventually returned to Otoe County in Nebraska. Rollin died on December 15, 1916, making Sadie a widow at 42. She returned to teaching to support her family, and worked as a principal and superintendent as well as a teacher. She died in Lincoln after a long illness on May 24, 1942, when she was 68.



Rollin and Sadie Wedding

School Safety Patrol



Members of the Columbian School Safety Patrol pose with officers from the Omaha Police Department. The photograph was taken on November 9, 1939 by Omaha commercial photographer Nathaniel Dewell.

With the rise of automobiles in the 1920s, school safety patrols grew out of concerns for the well-being of students as they walked to school. The Omaha Police Department instituted the first safety patrols in the United States in 1923. The role of students in the junior safety patrol was to “teach safety and role model it.” Since they had authority over students and not drivers, student members of the safety patrol were taught to “direct children, not traffic.”

The Columbian School was originally located at 38th and Jones Streets in Omaha. Named for Christopher Columbus, it opened in 1892. Due to the westward expansion of Omaha, a new Columbian School was built at 330 South 127th Street in September 1970.

Brown County’s Sod High School



Lakeland High School, believed to be the only sod high school in the nation, was built in Brown County, Nebraska, in 1934. RG3183-4-5

During the Depression years of the 1930s, Nebraskans were faced with a shortage of funds for school construction. Due to the lack of available wood in many areas of the state, early settlers had constructed some buildings of sod, abundant on the prairie and a good insulator against heat and cold. In 1934 in Brown County the residents took a lesson from their ancestors and constructed a sod high school. Accounts of this undertaking are recorded in a 1935 report of the Nebraska Emergency Relief Administration (NERA), a copy of which is in the Library/Archives of the History Nebraska.

Three Brown County rural school districts, located about twenty miles southwest of Ainsworth, decided to build a consolidated school, with sod as the basic construction material. After receiving NERA approval and funding, work was begun on July 20, 1934. Sod was cut from old lake beds in the area and a foreman was hired from relief roles. A sod roof supported by pole rafters topped a two-room structure, consisting of a classroom and living quarters for the teacher. It was completed on September 10. Several outbuildings, including two toilets and a barn for the students' horses, were also built of sod.

The dedication of the building on September 19 was attended by over fifty persons, including State Superintendent of Public Instruction Charles W. Taylor. The school opened with eleven students under the tutelage of E. E. Holm. Ninth, tenth, and eleventh grades of study were offered. The first graduates of Lakeland High School were Robert Vanderlinde and Sterling Wales in 1936. Altogether thirty-three students attended Lakeland. Eventually the building began to deteriorate, and the school was closed in 1941.



This photograph by Solomon D. Butcher depicted a sod school about sixty miles west of Merna, Custer County, in 1889. RG2608-1774
